

Lincoln F. Johnson: An extraordinary Ethiopian show at Morgan
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An extraordinary Ethiopian show at Morgan

The Morgan State College Gallery of Art is now showing an exhibition which may well be unique in the history of American art exhibitions.

Titled "Ethiopian Artists in America," it was conceived by James Lewis, chairman of the department of art and director of the gallery, who, while organizing two exhibitions for the Baltimore Museum (one of them currently showing in the Sales and Rental Gallery) began to speculate about the fact that while West African art is familiar and popular in this country, East African art is virtually unknown. The resulting exhibition was assembled by Achameleh Debela, assistant in the Gallery of Art, himself an Ethiopian and one of the exhibitors.

Different from American variety

The show is extraordinary in its variety and that variety is quite different from the variety of an American group show in Maryland. Regional, for example, because it contains many reverberations not only of the present but also

of a past so distant as to make the history of the United States seem little more than a sign.

As in the art of so many ancient cultures, India's for example, traditions centuries old stand side by side with manifestations of modernism, so that time seems condensed or entirely collapsed and the viewer, even in these days of instant accessibility to the art of the past, is forced to adopt new perspectives.

Exhibited all over

That is to say, it is a little startling to come upon some of the work of Tessfaye Tessema and recognize early medieval compositions, symbols and motives painted in luminous acrylic. According to Achameleh Debela, Christianity was adopted in Ethiopia in 330 and most of the art since then has emerged out of the Coptic church. Skundar Boghossian, in fact, has based a free-standing trio of paintings on the theme of Coptic crosses. Both Skundar and Tessfaye

use old ideas for personal expression, however.

Skundar Boghossian, now artist in residence at Howard University, is the best known of the painters. His work has been exhibited widely in Africa, Europe, the United States and South America and has been purchased by the Museums of Modern Art in New York and Paris and it is easy to see why. His work consistently exhibits confidence and control, subtle color relationships and constantly metamorphosing forms, and complex imagery, all going beyond mere style and manner to distinctive expression.

An interesting aspect of some of Skundar Boghossian's work and one of Tessfaye Tessema's, "Patience," and a number of pictures by other artists as well, is a resemblance to pictures by Paul Klee, testimony, I suspect, not of the influence of Klee but of the fecundity of the Coptic sources, which Klee also knew and admired.

Along with Skundar Boghossian, Achameleh Debela seems the most explora-

tory of the group, developing images sometimes with taut linear clarity, sometimes with a Pollock-like spontaneity, and now apparently working in sand reliefs combined with shells and beads and Ethiopian artifacts.

Deserves more attention

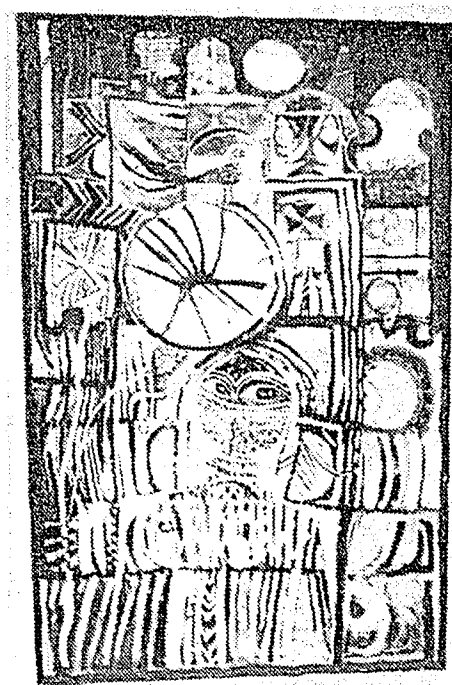
Also included are prints and reliefs by Falake Armida, paintings by Michael Gabriel and Alemayehu Medhin, and photographs by Balcha Tsadik and Mesfin Kebede, all of them quite different in their approaches to expressive problems.

Like the other shows of this kind, this one demonstrates the power of art to bring widely distant peoples into communion and it deserves a good deal more attention than it was getting when I visited it.

After the show closes here it will travel to other cities on the Eastern Seaboard.

There is an informative catalogue and a checklist.

Through March 25.



Skundar Boghossian, an Ethiopian artist, whose work is at the Morgan State College Gallery